

The Million Dollar Question: Why Does the Web Love Cats?

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If you haven't noticed, cats are big on the Internet. Even though the occasional panda, turtle or slow loris gets a slice of the viral action, cats are, and always have been, the prevalent species to be found online.

So why is it that the collective web is a "cat person," so to speak? Why are there so many kitty pics and videos cluttering up the Interwebs? And what is it about feline-themed content that makes it so weirdly shareable?

In the quest for answers to these important questions, we've talked to cat-themed content creators, viral experts, and other commentators from within the industry to try and solve one of the most pressing quandaries of our time.

Because They're Cute

Does the popularity of cats really come down to their inherent fluffy cuteness? Images and videos of cute cats were popular before the advent of the Internet, as Elspeth Rountree, the co-founder of [Know Your Meme](#), points out. She suggests we've always adored the feline species, it's just that the Internet provides a modern, one-click way to share such content.

"There are a few constants not only on the Internet, but throughout modern culture — an interest in all things cute: Starting in the 1870s with Harry Pointer and his [carte de visites](#) featuring cats with amusing captions, to our modern day incarnation of LOLcats, popular culture has taken interest in kittens, cats, babies, and puppies," says Rountree.

“They’re the perfect distraction from our hectic lives. You don’t need any explanation or prior knowledge to understand the slapstick humor that animals provide. Cat videos and images are a quick hit of pure, unfettered cute: They’re also entertainment in easily digestible doses.”

Because They’re Not Cute

The cute explanation alone is too simplistic, as although many of the cat memes have been cute or funny, there are just as many that portray cats as sinister creatures, plotting against man.

Cory Alder, the creator of the popular iPhone app [CatPaint](#), modestly describes himself as “mostly just programmer whos into cats.” He also doesn’t buy into the cute argument.

“I can say it’s not just because they’re cute. That would be a huge over-simplification. If it was just because they were cute I would have made KittenPaint or PuppyPaint, not CatPaint,” says Alder.

“Cats are awesome and enigmatic. They even have a hint of the danger about them. I read somewhere that scientists say cats domesticated themselves: Like, we domesticated dogs, and we made them into what we thought we wanted, but cats made themselves into what we actually wanted.”

Because They’re the Perfect Canvas for Human Projection

“Cats have very expressive facial and body expressions, so they are a perfect canvas for human emotion, which makes them awesome for captioning and anthropomorphization,” says Ben Huh, CEO of [The Cheezburger Network](#).

Cats get themselves into all kinds of amusing predicaments, and when there’s a human on hand to capture the moment, whether in a photo or on video, that’s raw material just begging to be shared. And because lots of people have cats, that’s lots of content.

“There are also an almost infinite number of pictures of cats or great bits of cat footage because so many people have them, meaning an abundance of raw material for meme creation,” says Matt Smith, director of strategy at [The Viral Factory](#).

“Juxtaposing surprising meanings over cat images, a la the LOLcats phenomenon, allows us to engage in an activity humans have long been doing: projecting our thoughts onto the mysterious countenance of felines,” says Sam Ford, director of digital strategy with [Peppercom](#), research affiliate with the [MIT Convergence Culture Consortium](#), and co-author of the forthcoming book *Spreadable Media*.

But the ready availability of imagery and film can’t be the only reason for such widespread popularity. After all, there must be equally as much canine content, right?

Because They're Not Dogs

While dogs have had a few notable successes online, they nowhere near match their feline counterparts for popularity. Jack Shepherd, community manager at [BuzzFeed](#) has a theory why.

“Dogs are the equivalent of a creative professional trying to manufacture the next viral sensation to advertise a brand – sure, theyll have a hit now and again, but unless its really exceptional work, youll just ignore it, because you know theyre doing it to get your attention,” says Shepherd.

“When a dog gets in a box, it’s because he desperately wants you to think he’s cool. When a cat does it, it’s because it suddenly felt like the right thing to do at the time. More often than not, it totally was. I think it’s the very aloofness of cats that makes us want to caption their thoughts, or put them in front of a keyboard and see what happens. The many Keyboard Dogs were a failure not just because they came second, but because they were enjoying themselves far too much.”

Sam Ford, meanwhile, suggests that dogs are just too easy to read: “Throughout the history of civilization, humans have had a deep fascination with cats. While dogs’ forms of communication — and understanding of language — are more closely aligned with humans, cats are particularly fascinating because they are not necessarily as easy to read.”

“Thus, watching a cats exploits on [YouTube](#) can be all the more surprising, because we all know its harder to train cats to do something. Seeing video of [The Moscow Cats Theater](#) leads us to marvel, Howd they do that?,” says Ford.

Because Cats are Jerks

Cats ignore us, vomit on our carpets, drag in horrible things, demand food, want affection on their terms and stay out all night. Is sharing undignified cat content online our way of getting our revenge on the species?

Despite many of us calling ourselves cat lovers, one theory that’s worthy of consideration (although many of us might not like it) is that we enjoy seeing cats virtually humiliated.

“Most of us who have dealt with cats know that cats are jerks, and while outright abuse is never popular, I think a lot of people just like to see cats get their comeuppance,” says [Brad OFarrell](#), writer for the [Daily Squee](#), and creator of the Play Him Off, Keyboard Cat video.

“That’s probably why LOLcats are so popular. It’s both funny to pretend that a cat is actually riding an invisible bicycle and it’s enjoyable because the cat is being subjected to an acceptable range of humiliation — it’s funny but not abusive.”

[Tom Cox](#), owner of four cats and author of [Under the Paw – Confessions of a Cat Man](#) and the upcoming title “Talk to the Tail” agrees on the comedy aspect:

“Cats have a combination of incredible dignity, but also comedy about them. Cats can be so ridiculously pleased with themselves — and you don’t get that with dogs. Because they are so proud and so aware of that dignity, when it is punctured it’s the funniest thing in the world.”

Matt Smith also concurs with how amusing it can be when a cat is brought down to size.

“Cats are the perfect vehicle for Internet humor because they are cute and very self-possessed, but also rather arrogant and pompous,” says Smith. “Since there is nothing the web loves more than puncturing pomposity, they are a great target because they can easily be made to look foolish.”

Because Geeks Own Cats

If you buy into the argument that geeks control what’s trending on the Internet, then it follows that anything geeks are fond of will be prevalent online.

“Cats have an independence and playful inventiveness that appeals to the solitary geeks who spend their time writing computer code,” says Jack Schofield, freelance technology journalist and author of the [Ask Jack](#) Guardian blog.

“Cats require relatively little maintenance (no baths, no walks) and are basically nocturnal animals, so they’re a perfect match for the Internet geek/coder/hacker lifestyle”

From his viewpoint from within the developer industry, Alders experience is that in addition to comic relief, cats offer cubicle-dwellers a glimpse of the wilder world.

“The people I know who are most into cats on the Internet are the people who work all day on the computer. So cats, for them, are an intrusion of wilderness into a somewhat sterile technology-filled workplace.”

Because It’s All a Cat Conspiracy

Jack Schofield shares a favorite quote with us on the topic of a cat-dominated Internet. “[David Burge](#) once said that when John Atanasoff and Clifford Berry developed the first digital computing machine at Iowa State University in 1937, little did they know that their invention would become an integral part of a sophisticated worldwide cat picture distribution system: This is funny because it’s true.”

There’s certainly some comedy to be drawn from the fact that we have an amazing, potentially world-changing resource available to us in the form of the Internet, and so much time is spent on it giggling at ninja cat clips. Is this rational? Or are we all unknowing victims of some kind of conspiracy, yet to be revealed?

“The reason for the continued and overwhelming popularity of cats on the internet is because the Internet is actually an enormous social experiment in which we humans are merely unwitting pawns,” jokes Matt Smith.

“Cats have been domesticating and harvesting humans for at least two millennia, albeit slowly, generation by generation. With the Internet, they are moving much faster, and in only two or three more generations, we will be completely incapable of sustaining a line of thought for more than half a second, and therefore effectively be zombies in the service of our feline masters who will use pitiful Photoshoppers to communicate with us.”

We've considered cats cuteness, non-cuteness, popularity among geeks, blank canvas qualities, personality issues and the fact that dogs just dont have "it." So are we any closer to a definitive answer?

Not really, no.

We can all draw our own conclusions about why cats are so prevalent online, but in the meantime, we'll leave you with with our favorite theory from Burnell Yow, [Nora The Piano Cats](#) personal assistant:

“Cats seem totally comfortable being exactly what they are, and they are totally alive to the moment, which is something we, as humans, have lost sight of, though we are trying to get back to that enlightened state,” says Yow.

“Why do you think so many people meditate and practice yoga? We are seeking to be more cat-like, and perhaps our embracing of cats is simply the embracing of what we know to be essential in ourselves.”